1994 AND ALL THAT

1994. There is a cluster of scarified pierce punks sitting on the sidewalk in front of the window of the Intermezzo coffee house on Telegraph Avenue talking about the history of tattoo. Shaved heads, ear and nose rings, studded tongues; ah, it's a mutilated world out there. Did I ever expect to see the day when there would be a piercing salon on the Avenue doing more business that some of the bookstores? The lot across the street where the Berkeley Inn stood from 1911-1991 is still empty but someone is buying the property for development. That translates into more yuppie stores. More places to buy things. Just what we need around here, more product outlets to glom the student parental dollar. Tuition rates have been going up and up and up at UC. Got to get rid of those poor people at the bottom and make room for the kids of the new rich. New laws against sitting on the streets and begging in the works. Got to get these homeless people out of sight. Wanna buy some used CD's cheap? Amoeba and Rasputin's will sell them to you. Need a slice of gummy hot pizza? Blondie's and LaVal's and Kip's will sell it to you. Ah, yes, the Chinese family that now owns Kip's has a pizza oven, but you can still get a burger and fries for less than four bucks. When I was a student at Cal back in 1963, I paid 37¢ and I could rent a room at the Carleton for a buck.

There aren't any dormitories on People's Park yet, but UC is still trying. Local artists have painted every inch of the new bathrooms and the graffiti inform the new students about social issues that are still alive in the negative nineties, the age of anarchy. I haven't seen any naked people this week, but it's been cold and rainy, a typical Bay Area winter, and naked activism is a fair weather enterprise. I don't expect the X-Plicit Players or the Topless Brigade to pass today. Actually, I don't drink my tea at the Intermezzo these days. The place is always full, for one thing, and I don't like the view for another. These bald-headed chopped up teenagers in their threadbare jeans and second-hand leather are not my idea of a pleasant view.

"Why are there no earthquakes on Telegraph Avenue?"

"Because there's a wingnut holding down every corner."

I hear this joke told by a street merchant to a cop standing by his bicycle outside Rasputin's new glass CD palace. It's all CD's in Berkeley now. Vinyl is dead, though you can still find records here and there. My friend collects the older funkier ones the way Crumb collects the 78s from the 1920's. Crumb lives in Paris now with his wife, Aline, and his daughter, Sophie. You can still find some of his books on a counter at the rear of Comics and Comics, but most of them are too expensive to buy. I see people reading them. No one plays much attention to the sign that tells them to limit their reading time to twenty minutes. I don't know anyone at C & C anymore. The people I used to know have moved behind the scenes, moved up in the hierarchy. The clerks are all strangers to me. People who keep up with underground comix go elsewhere, mostly to Comic Relief on University Avenue, because they still keep a stash of the back issues. C & C has the impersonal feel of a mall chainstore. I can't relate to most of the new comics anyway, though I do collect some of them like **Shade** and **Shadowman**. I usually read at **THE COMICS JOURNAL** and get irritated because there are so many errors that go uncorrected. I read this interview with Bill Griffith sometime ago and Bill was talking about **COMIX BOOK** being an imitation of **ARCADE**. **COMIX BOOK** not only came out in 1974, the year before **ARCADE**, but it had artwork by Art Spiegelman, Bill's co-editor on **ARCADE**. The problem with those **TCJ** interviews is the errors are passed along as history. I know Gary Groth just prints the interviews as they happened, but as someone who has a long history of discussing comic books and comic art with artists I know I have to verify what they tell me before printing it as fact. I've only known a couple of cartoonists I would trust as historians, the others know about their own particular interests and can't be trusted when they comment about comic art history. I feel it is the publisher's responsibility to check the facts in an interview or have someone else check them. Why? Because if there is one error, perhaps there are others, and if there are, the researcher cannot trust the publication.

Someone asked me how I felt about some of the 'alternative" comics like **YUMMY FUR, HATE, PEEPSHOW, EIGHTBALL, DIRTY PLOTTE, & SLUTBURGER**, well, first of all, I call these underground comix, since I still consider "alternative" comics to be those that copped out to the censors back in the seventies and titles like **HATE** have stayed on the mark. I've read all of them and enjoyed them over the years. If I don't mention all of them, it's because I have to buy them these days and it goes against the grain for me to give free advertising to people who don't comp me their funnybooks. Doesn't mean I don't keep up with these comics and enjoy the stories in them, just means I have one attitude about putting out this newsletter and another about stuff I enjoy that I have to pay for. The comics mentioned get enough coverage elsewhere. I try to focus more on people who lack access to more widely distributed zines.

I finally got around to reading all those articles in the first seven issues of **BLAB!** and I realized that most, maybe all, cartoonists have a very distorted view of what they are doing and who they are doing it for. They talk of reaching an audience that normally does not read comic books, in other words, an audience other than their own stereotyped notion of who the reader is--well, the only cartoonists who reach that audience are doing editorial cartoons or syndicated strips and single panels, because comic books are read by a specific audience and people outside that audience ignore them. Robert Crumb became famous because his **Head Comix** were distributed all over the world in underground newspapers like **The East Village Other** and his cartooning style was known to millions of people before he got together with Don Donahue and published the first **ZAP** in February of 1968. Jaxon got underground comix into the head shops through contacts he made when he was art director for the Family Dog. Don Schenker did the same thing when he was printing rock posters and postcards, got the shops to take some comic books at the same time. Underground newspapers reached a young audience for about a decade [1964-76] and during that time underground comix had an advertising medium. Some of the artists, like Rick Griffin, Victor Moscoso,

and Greg Irons did posters *and* comic books and had the advantage of cross-promotion. People who saw Rick Griffin's **Tales of the Tube** in **Surfer** in 1972 and realized the same artist was doing rock posters for the Fillmore and album covers for the Grateful Dead were likely to take an interest when they found out he was doing stories for **ZAP**. Some of the publishers are now saying that underground comics peaked and began to decline when the head shop distribution fell through after a Supreme Court Decision in late 1972, but by then the Comic Store Movement was spreading around the country and if the comix had had the staying power they could have sold as well or even better through the comic stores. When the Viet Nam war came to an end, the major cause of the politically oriented underground papers ended with it and most of the papers became local ad sheets or died a quick death. The survivors became sex papers. In Berkeley, the **BARB** had split into two sections before it's demise, the front half remaining political while the second half became **THE SPECTATOR**, a sheet filled with ads for hookers, nude beaches, relationships, and phone sex. The **BARB** died and **THE SPECTATOR** survived. It's still in the coin boxes around the Bay Area. Still battling with local parents from time to time because their kids have access to anything in street coin boxes.

Abbie Hoffman blamed Jann Wenner and **ROLLING STONE** for the demise of underground papers. He called Wenner the Benedict Arnold of the movement for starting the rock paper and taking all the rock ads away from the other papers. Wenner promised the same hip audience without the radical politics and the record companies went with him. I just reread **SOON TO BE A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE**, Abbie Hoffman's autobiography and guess what--he didn't even mention underground comix! I'm sure he saw and read them, but radical politicos were always above talking about such things as comic strips. Oh, they made use of them--see the issue of **RADICAL AMERIKA** done by Gilbert Shelton and others, but in the biographies, the comix play no part. See Tom Hayden's **REUNION** and Jerry Rubin's **WE ARE EVERYWHERE.** Even in Charles Perry's minute by minute analysis of what happened in **HAIGHT ASHBURY** ignores the comix. No mention of Crumb and his wife selling **ZAPS** out of the baby carriage. It's my argument that *people inside the comics community take them seriously and see them as an influential force in their lives, but people outside that eclectic group take them for granted or ignore them.*

When people no longer saw underground comix in the weekly tabloids, they thought they were gone. The average person would be surprised to know there were 12 issues of **ZAP**. "Hey, I thought that stuff went out in the sixties with free acid and hippies and love beads." Jacob Brackman wrote the comix off as a sixties fad in **PLAYBOY** in 1969 when there were only five or six **ZAPS**. Underground comix didn't stop. The people who did them went on doing them. And when *they* stopped, others continued to do them. Peter Bagge is doing a lot of the same things in his autobiographical stories in **NEAT STUFF** and **HATE** that Crumb did in **ZAP**. I'm sure Bagge was able to succeed Crumb at **WEIRDO** because there was an affinity between the two cartoonists. Think Dan Clowes wasn't effected by the pop existentialism of Crumb?

But, hey, fuck those people who don't read comic books. I doubt that any cartoonist really draws for those people. What the hell for? They have what they want, so why bother them? And I don't see Art Spiegelman as having made any kind of a breakthrough at all with a hardback book version of **MAUS**. I liked his early comic book stuff a lot more than that concentration camp story that went on and on. Art should have been given a prize for **ACE HOLE** because that was a tour de force.

There is a well developed and established comics community now and it includes people who read and love comic books. They keep the stores going, they keep over fifty companies in business, and they are willing to pony up the bucks to go to a cycle of conventions every year so they can hang out and party together. For a cartoonist to say he wants to reach an audience other than the one that normally reads comics is like him saying he wishes his mom would read and appreciate his books. It's a nice fantasy, but unlikely to happen. It's also insulting to the comics community which is where he gets his ego-boo and his income. Gary Groth told Peter Bagge the same thing in the first issue of **I LIKE COMICS**. Go for that reader who does not ordinarily read comics. So call it *THE POPULAR CULTURE JOURNAL* or *THAT OTHER READER JOURNAL*. But if it is about comic books, it belongs inside the comics community. That's a battle that can't be won, Gary. The people who sneer at comic art have clouded minds. The Shadow has wiped them out for good. They are missing a fantasy world the rest of us have access to, and we feel superior to them because we know it and they do not. My feeling is why bother them?

Crumb said his father never looked at his comics. There's the crux. Comics expand the child world into adulthood. If adults could see it, get into it, a kid would have no place to hide, no place to develop a self. My mother never looked at my comic book stash. She never knew or cared whether I was reading about Little Lulu or the Blonde Phantom. I liked it that way and now that I write about comics I know I am writing to others who have had the same experience I have, not to their parents.

Truth is that kind of talk has nothing to do with comic books. It has to do with money. Hey, if people who didn't read comic books started reading them, there would be a lot more money coming in!

Talk about changing times. I passed a Walden bookstore this afternoon and there in the window on a revolving comic rack was the latest reprint of **TALES FROM THE CRYPT** right next to the latest issue of **THE FLINTSTONES**. This may not mean anything to the young reader, but to those of us who lived through the years of EC comics and saw them disappear from the drugstore rack in the wake of the Wertham crusade and the coming of the Comics Code Authority, seeing the Crypt Keeper meet Fred Flintstone in a junk book outlet was a flash. The horror stories are so tame compared to the filmed versions of them on cable that no one blinks an eye. I suspect Walden would sell **ZAPS** if they could bandage up a panel here and there.

Ron Turner sent me an invitation to his Christmas party. **Last Gasp** has moved to **777 Florida Street** in **San Francisco [94110]** so jot that down. You can still get Ron's catalog for a couple of bucks and it's a good listing of underground comix and other items. Ron has stuff like **YOUNG LUST 8** and John Howard's **HORNY BIKER SLUTS 6.** He just put out an anthology of Spain's **BIG BITCH** art. Spain started the biker trend in underground comics back in his **ZODIAC MINDWARP**. Meant to be a comic book, it was published as a tabloid back in 1967. Spain rode with a group known as the Road Vultures and he told a number of stories about them. His character Trashman evolved out of the gang and starred in a couple of issues of **SUBVERT**. The Big Bitch stuff will remind you all of the Women's Lib wars of the early seventies. Trina did **ALL GIRL THRILLS** for The Print Mint and right on the heels of this one came Spain with **MEAN BITCH THRILLS**. Femacho fought against macho. Crumb took on the Sisterhood in **BLACK AND WHITE** in 1973. That story was reprinted by Jeff Rund in his collection of Crumb called **CARLOAD O' COMICS** and is now in print in a recent volume of **THE COMPLETE CRUMB**. Spain, like Jaxon, after his underground period, drifted into historical research and did some interesting work for **ARCADE** and **WEIRDO**. Be nice to see a complete collection of Spain's work in one of those coffee table books.

Denis Kitchen sent his latest catalog or to be more accurate a mailing service included me on an old list. I can always tell. **Kitchen Sink** has moved to **320 Riverside Drive, Northampton, MA 01060**. Jot that down, too. Kitchen says in the editorial that he has acquired Tundra. I've heard a lot of mumbling and grumbling about this merger, but I will leave it to **TCJ** to print all that stuff. I suspect Kevin Eastman got tired of arguing with artists and distributors; after all, you get into comics because you like to draw and if you are successful you wind up a businessman who has little time to draw. Crumb handled it pretty well. When Don Schenker tried to suck him into the business during the early years of The Print Mint, Crumb danced aside and left the business end to others. Instead of contracting all of his work to one company, he deliberately spread it around to half a dozen companies. Well, he got burned quite often and did not make the money he might have made, but he had his time to himself and it's likely he has drawn more individual comic books that any other cartoonist alive or dead. Crumb is prolific, the Isaac Asimov of the comics.

I have some data available on disc. I use a Macintosh SE20 and am using Microsoft Word 4. If you have compatible Mac equipment or access to a file translator, you may want a copy of some of my stuff. I sell my listing of cartoonists for $10/$2 post. If you're doing research, get in touch.

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